



**CARIAA**  
Collaborative Adaptation Research  
Initiative in Africa and Asia

**NOVEL INSIGHTS BRIEF**

# RESEARCH FOR IMPACT



More than one billion people live in deltas, semi-arid lands, and glacier-dependent basins in Africa and Asia, hotspot regions that are the most vulnerable to climate change.

Over 7 years, the CARIAA program supported collaborative research to strengthen resilience in these hotspots by informing policy and practice. CARIAA brought together more than 450 researchers across 15 countries through four consortia, with selected study areas based on geographic and social similarities—with the aim of sharing knowledge and experiences across disciplines, sectors and geographies.

The CARIAA Novel Insights series provides a snapshot of the key insights that emerged from this work, on the most pertinent topics for climate adaptation.

# RESEARCHERS, PRACTITIONERS AND DONORS NEED TO INTEGRATE FLEXIBILITY AND LEARNING INTO PROGRAMMING IN ORDER TO PURSUE RESEARCH FOR IMPACT.

Research for impact is about seeking opportunities for research to create positive change in the face of complex sustainability challenges. There are no easy steps toward achieving impact: It is about working with people, building long-term relationships, and accepting that achieving research impact will be an unfolding journey that takes time<sup>1</sup>. There are no 'solutions' to the challenge of how to pursue research for impact. However, there are ways of working collaboratively that effectively support climate change adaptation, where the goal is often to influence both policy and practice. Reflexive ways of working that hold flexibility and learning as core principles for practice are critical for achieving research for impact. Truly internalising these principles has significant implications for donors, researchers and practitioners.

## BACKGROUND

From the pioneers of action research in the 1990s, to social learning and transdisciplinary approaches more recently<sup>2</sup>, researchers long ago abandoned the idea of themselves as passive observers and documenters of environmental and social change.

- Action research methodologies significantly built our understanding of stakeholder engagement and have been effective in generating buy-in and empowering participants at community scales.
- As complex environmental challenges such as climate change became more prominent over the past twenty years, a growing body of scholarship on social learning emerged. Here the intention has been to support collective action and ensure that learning moves across scales through facilitated processes of knowledge co-production, experimentation, and reflection.

- Throughout these shifts, multiple knowledge systems and ways of knowing have been forced into conversation, fundamentally challenging traditional notions of disciplinary rigour, objectivity and 'truth'. Transdisciplinarity has emerged as a philosophical position and emerging practice that encourages problem-oriented research in service to society. Transdisciplinary approaches involve co-production processes between researchers, practitioners and other societal actors, with the explicit intention of generating research impact or a positive change in the world.

Although the imperative of research for impact has existed for some time, neither action research, nor social learning, nor transdisciplinarity offer easy recipes for how to practically pursue it. Learning in CARIAA has offered insight into effective ways of pursuing research for impact.

# NEW INSIGHTS

## TO FACILITATE IMPACT A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES MUST BE PURSUED SIMULTANEOUSLY

Research for impact includes the following interrelated activities (see Figure 1 below):

- Capacity building of both researchers and research users
- Stakeholder engagement that is long-term, sustained, needs-focussed and strategic
- Generating credible, relevant and contextualised evidence, often through knowledge co-production with potential users of the research
- Building of strategic partnerships with practitioners and other actors who can support the development and uptake of contextualised knowledge
- Research communication that is targeted, accessible and appropriate in form

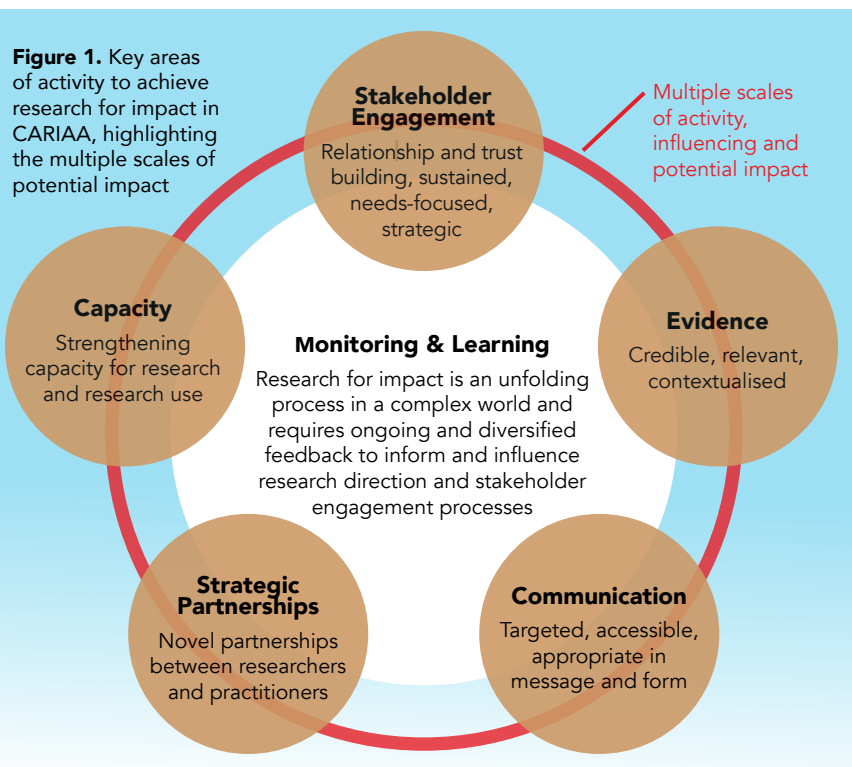
- Reflective monitoring that is intended to improve practices in all of the previous related areas of work

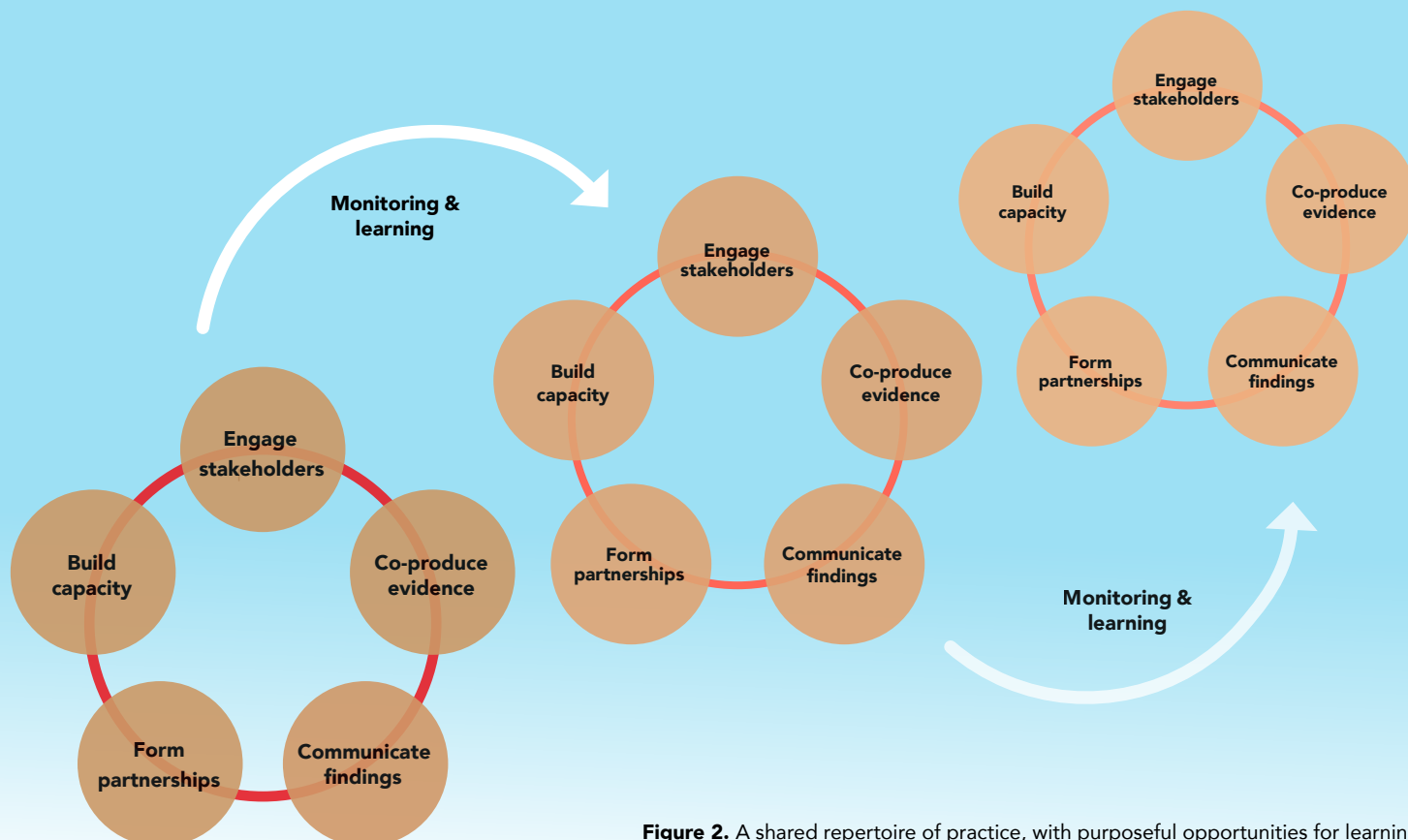
## PURPOSEFUL AND LONG-TERM LEARNING IS CENTRAL TO ACHIEVING RESEARCH IMPACT

Learning cycles that create ongoing opportunities for reflection and sharing experiences are fundamental to both responding to evolving opportunities for impact, and embedding learning within larger networks of practice. To achieve this, it is important to create opportunities for a shared repertoire of language, approaches and activities to emerge. In other words, to create opportunities for a community of practice to develop. In CARIAA we achieved this by creating face-to-face learning opportunities every 6 months, co-developing a common framework<sup>3</sup> of what we understood the key practices necessary for research impact to be, and by developing (with outside support) a shared learning framework<sup>4</sup> for reflection on successes and failures at project level.

Figure 2 presents the shared practices co-identified by the group involved. These practices offered the substance for much of the reflection and learning about research for impact in the program. Each consortium placed different levels of emphasis on each of these practices as they pursued research for impact, but because they had a shared language, it was possible to share learning in ways that were understandable to all involved. Through implementing these activities and reflecting on the outcomes, we have developed a number of insights about approaches that support impact.

**Figure 1.** Key areas of activity to achieve research for impact in CARIAA, highlighting the multiple scales of potential impact





**Figure 2.** A shared repertoire of practice, with purposeful opportunities for learning

## IT IS ESSENTIAL TO MOVE BEYOND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Too often, research teams consider stakeholder engagement as their approach to research for impact. Stakeholder engagement is important, but it is only one of many strategies that can support impact. The goal should be building relationships and trust with stakeholders, and that might require flexible combinations of activities such as capacity building, communications and partnerships to achieve.

In Nepal and Pakistan, for example, research teams learned the importance of being open to offering capacity building to stakeholders, often on topics that were not part of their stakeholder engagement plans. This kind of flexibility and responsiveness has been key to strategic partnerships and deeper impact.

In the case of the HI-AWARE (Himalayan Adaptation, Water and Resilience on Glacier and Snowpack Dependent River Basins for Improving Livelihoods) consortium, initial engagement with Nepalese leaders in the national adaptation planning process, revealed that capacity building was needed to support the country in its efforts to develop a National

Adaptation Plan. Therefore, although the research team had originally intended to engage these leaders on the project's specific research findings, they changed direction and offered a certified course on climate change adaptation for those involved in the development of the National Adaptation Plan. This resulted in sustained relationships with key stakeholders, and in HI-AWARE data on observed climate trends in Nepal being used to inform the National Adaptation Plan reports, launched in February 2018.

Similarly, in Pakistan, outcome mapping approaches adopted by the PRISE (Pathways to Resilience in Semi-arid Economies) consortium indicated that despite heavy investments to engage parliamentarians on climate issues emanating from the research project, the impact was limited. Based on these findings, the team changed direction and offered capacity building to parliamentarians to increase their understanding of key basic climate change and adaptation concepts. This led to a tangible increase in engagement and enabled PRISE's evidence-based policy recommendations to be shared in high-level national and international fora and policy documents.

## A CLEAR VISION OF THE DESIRED IMPACT IS ESSENTIAL, BUT MUST BE PAIRED WITH FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility and a willingness to deviate from carefully laid (and budgeted for) plans has been a feature of all successful research for impact efforts in CARIAA.

In the case of PRISE, flexibility was pursued through a demand-driven approach, which strengthened the commitment of key decision makers in seven study areas by responding to identified (existing) policy issues. The use of outcome mapping led to an iterative process and allowed projects to deal with increasing interest from stakeholders, recognizing the impact of their activities and adapt to changes in the political contexts in which they worked. Overall, the outcome mapping approach enabled PRISE to see that their initial impact plan was not useful, and their willingness to change direction led to much greater opportunity for impact.

In Senegal, for example, where the intention was to influence the private sector and enhance key actors' ability to integrate climate resilience into businesses plans, PRISE originally targeted larger multinational organisations, which were deemed to have greatest leverage for change. However, it became apparent that these organisations were showing little interest or willingness to engage with PRISE research, and the team concluded that these were not strategic entry points to influence change. The engagement strategy therefore shifted substantially to focus on small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The result has been growing demand from SMEs and government agencies working with the private sector for information and support.

The DECCMA (Deltas, vulnerability and Climate Change: Migration and Adaptation) consortium was able to capitalise on two unexpected opportunities to inform policy in Ghana and India. In Ghana, the parliamentarian heading the National Expert Advisory Group, who is also a member of the Parliamentary Committee on Science, Environment and Technology, intervened during the development of the Coastal Authority Development Bill to ensure that a representative of academia is included on the

board. In the Mahanadi delta in India the DECCMA team responded to calls for inputs to the draft Odisha Action Plan on Climate Change 2018-23 (the only research institution to do so) and, as a result of their inputs, the plan contains a chapter on gender. Neither opportunity could have been foreseen at the start of the project.

In almost all cases of successful impact, the ASSAR (Adaptation at Scale in Semi-arid Regions) consortium has had to be flexible and responsive to unexpected demands for their inputs from stakeholders. For example, in Botswana, the government invited the project team to contribute toward the country's national drought management strategy by developing a guidance paper for them. This required time and resources to be diverted from other planned activities and devoted to this opportunity for impact. Also in Botswana, ASSAR sub-district level work on contextualising adaptation challenges and using these findings to inform development planning led to a request to offer much larger scale training for economic and development planners at the national level. Responding to this request, and the opportunity for impact that it represented, required significant changes to work plans, and budgets. While research institutions were less interested in offering such training, practitioner partners drove the process forward, highlighting the importance of these kinds of partnerships in research for impact.



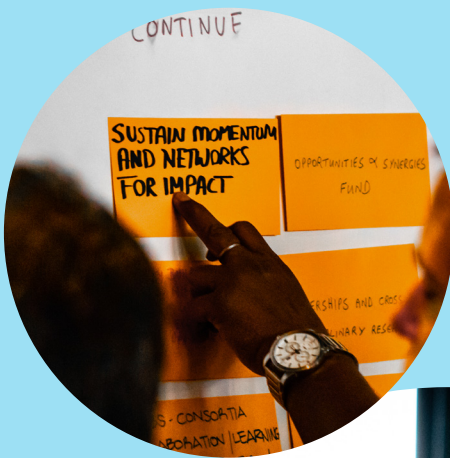
Photo credit: Alistair Daynes





## PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATIONS AND ATTENTION TO BRAND RECOGNITION CAN IMPROVE THE CHANCES OF RESEARCH UPTAKE FOR LARGE-SCALE PROJECTS

Professional science communication can be a powerful tool to assist research teams in their efforts to achieve impact. In most cases, consortia had dedicated communications personnel whose primary responsibility was to create widely accessible communications products for a variety of audiences. DECCMA, who did not have a dedicated communications team, discovered that professionally produced briefs achieved much wider uptake than their standard office-printed outputs, and all consortia produced a variety of visuals including video, infographics, story maps, and coordinated social media campaigns to increase brand recognition and conduct broadcast communications. DECCMA also discovered the power of visual imagery when drone footage of coastal flooding prompted political interest and action where previous written evidence had failed to generate traction.



## BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF RESEARCHERS TO PURSUE RESEARCH UPTAKE IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS CAPACITY BUILDING FOR KNOWLEDGE USERS

While we tend to think that capacity building as part of a research for impact plan is aimed at the users of the knowledge that will be produced through a project, our experience is that capacity building for researchers themselves is critical to achieving impact.

Shifting researchers' mindsets through training in stakeholder engagement techniques, power analysis or advocacy and influencing, as well as ongoing mentorship, was critical. Researchers in ASSAR, HI-AWARE and DECCMA identified new ways of thinking about impact, communications and the benefits of their research as among the highlights of their involvement in the CARIIAA program. In ASSAR, the close interactions between researchers and practitioners led to shifts in research approaches, the priority given to the policy and practice implications of the findings, and the importance accorded to communicating results.



Photo credit: Alistair Daynes

# LOOKING FORWARD

Prioritising flexibility and learning has significant implications for funders and researcher-practitioner teams alike.

- Funders need to support research teams to be responsive to their growing understanding of the context, and the leverage points for change, by building flexibility into grant agreements.
- Researchers and practitioners need diversified teams where the skills needed to both identify opportunities for impact, and to support learning and reflection, are present. Opportunities for reflection and course adjustment must be budgeted for at the outset of a project, as should flexible funds that allow teams to mobilise swiftly in response to opportunities for impact.

- In large programs that involve multiple partners working in diverse contexts, it is important to create opportunities for a dedicated group of research for impact leaders to emerge. Regular face-to-face engagements, and a common language and set of practices, are key to succeeding in this.

In addition to the above, as we move toward research for impact quite generally, the issue of gender deserves closer scrutiny. Some questions we don't yet have the answers to, but that we hope others will explore in the future, include how the gender of researchers influences the kinds of relationships that they are able to forge in the pursuit of impact, and how women researchers and practitioners can be supported to pursue impact in patriarchal contexts.

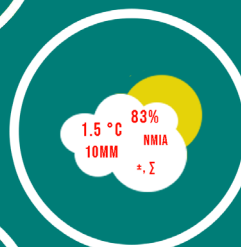
## REFERENCES + FURTHER READING

1. Reed M (2018) The Research Impact Handbook. Fast Track Impact, Aberdeenshire.
  2. Keen M, Brown V, Dyball R (2005) Social Learning in Environmental Management: Towards a sustainable future. Earthscan, London.
  3. CARIAA (2017) **The CARIAA Research-into-Use (RiU) Learning Guide.**
  4. CARIAA (2017) **Research into Use in CARIAA.** CARIAA Guidance Note.
- 
- University of Cape Town and Oxfam (2018) Research for Impact (MOOC). Retrieved from <https://www.coursera.org/UCT>.
  - Jones L, Harvey B, Cochrane L, Cantin B, Conway D, Cornforth R, De Souza K, Kirbyshire A (2018) Designing the next generation of climate adaptation research for development. *Regional Environmental Change* 18(1), 297-304. (doi: 10.1007/s10113-017-1254-x)

## OTHER TOPICS IN THE SERIES



MIGRATION



1.5°C WARMING



EFFECTIVE ADAPTATION



GENDER AND SOCIAL EQUITY

CARIAA is jointly funded by the UK's Department for International Development and Canada's International Development Research Centre.



International Development Research Centre  
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Canada



OCTOBER 2018